

Extra Chapter - Goddess of the Forest

Part 1

Due east of Asura Kingdom, across the mountain range.

In this part of Central Continent, numerous small kingdoms vied for domination.

This area where nations constantly rose and fell came to be known as the Strife Zone.

Amongst the many kingdoms within Strife Zone was one named Malkin Mercenary State.

A nation built by mercenaries, its livelihood relied on the employment of mercenaries by neighboring countries.

A tavern at some corner of Malkin.

Two mercenaries sat across a table, one boasting about the scar on his shoulder to the other.

"Haha, look, I got this one from the defense of Rudomin."

"Ohh, that battle? It was intense."

"Where were you deployed?"

"Fortress Dells, east gate. It was hellish.... Just a bit more, and I would have lost my precious right hand."

"Hellish? I heard east gate of Fotress Dells was flanked and almost annihilated!"

"Wasn't the defense of Rudomin the same? I heard your supply line was cut. There wasn't even money to feed the mercenaries."

Malkin provided support to all nations equally.

And their mercenaries were feared by every nation.

It was said, one Malkin warrior could take on a thousand.

It was said, their commanders always kept their cool.

It was said, their generals practiced inhuman foresight.

Once the battle began, they'd always bring victory to their allies.

On the battlefield, they're the symbol of terror and victory.

This was Malkin Mercenary State.

"Sure is a miracle, somehow we both came out alive."

"That's right! Only because Goddess of the Forest protected us!"

One of the mercenary removed the necklace he wore, on it hanged a wooden pendant carved with a portrait of a woman with animal ears.

Seeing the pendant, the other mercenary unsheathed the dagger on his waist.

The blade was painted red.

"Well then, a toast to the Forest Goddess Reinu, cheers!"

"Please grant us victory in the next battle! Cheers!"

With one hand wielding their pendant or dagger, their other hand lifted their mugs high, then with a single gulp they chugged their drinks.

That's their way of prayer.

"Ah~ yes!"

"A drink after battle is a must! Malkin's beer is the best!"

"And women too!"

"Shall we visit some brothels after?"

"But don't tell my wife!"

"Wahahaha!"

Cheerfully, they drank the night away.

Goddess of the Forest Reinu.

The goddess worshiped by Malkin mercenaries.

According to folklore, a hundred years ago when Malkin was on the brink of destruction, she appeared to provide guidance to their general. The savior goddess of a nation.

Thus every mercenary in Malkin believed that Forest Goddess Reinu would appear to their aid when they're on the brink of death.

That's why, the mercenaries worship the goddess.

Giving prayers for battle, and for their own survival.

That was how they could return to the battlefield.

The strange thing was, of the great many nations of this wide world, only Malkin worshipped the Forest Goddess Reinu.

How did such a tradition come about in this country?

There's a story behind that.

Part 2

Armored Dragon Calendar Year 417.

Mercenary King Malkin had only founded the independent Malkin Mercenary State for two years when the Metastasis Event happened in Asura Kingdom.

At that moment, Malkin Mercenary State was already on the brink of destruction.

It's nothing out of the ordinary. Nations simply come and go in the Strife Zone.

People would always try to carve out their own territory when the opportunity arose, and grow with it the ambition to hold dominion over the land, only to eventually see that dream shattered.

Malkin Mercenary State was simply following the fate of so many previous nations.

It's only natural.

But everything happened for a reason.

What led this nation towards death's door was failed diplomacy.

A mercenary based economy, Malkin wielded economic and military power beyond what was typical of a fledgling nation.

But that was also the cause.

Malkin bordered two nations, Dzik Kingdom and Blows Empire and drew their ire. After diplomacy broke down, both nations declared war against Malkin simultaneously.

Even for a mercenary state that could punch above its weight, it couldn't handle a war on two fronts.

Despite fierce resistance, a key fortress was overran and several large engagements were lost. The state had already lost half of its territories.

A nation without a future.

Seeing this, its mercenaries fled the sinking ship to neighboring regions, some even flipped sides.

The final battle was fought in a great basin that came to be known as "Remains of Malkin's Final Battle."

Until then, the two invading states operated independently, but because the basin was flanked on both sides by a magical beast infested forest, their ability to maneuver was greatly restricted. As result, they had no choice but joint forces.

Another crucial reason, the basin was of great strategic importance for controlling the nearby capital after defeating Malkin.

It's no secret that the victors would turn on each other after the battle.

Malkin certainly would like to take advantage of the animosity between the allied states, but it needed the combat force to do so. Their remaining forces could barely defend themselves.

Even this last ditch effort took all that they could muster.

Part 3

Malkin Mercenary third division captain, Vigo Mercenary, was leading ten subordinates into a forest.

Named forbidden forest due to the large number of magical beasts within. Considered too dangerous to traverse, since ancient times all the local rulers forbade citizens from entry.

All the local always consented, even lumberjacks refused to enter the forbidden forest.

And of course neither would armies. In this battle, both invading forces avoided the forest as well.

Mercenary King Malkin made note of this.

Break through this forest and raid one of the two camps. A simple, but effective strategy.

Even so, Malkin had already exhausted its military strength. Even something as simple as trekking through a forest, if they engage with magical beasts it'd likely be a waste of effort. The raid itself likely would end in failure as well.

But Malkin came up with a plan.

In prior battles, they captured some armor from Blows Empire.

Have some of his soldiers wear them and raid the rear of Dzik Kingdom camp.

The alliance between these two nations would hold until Malkin was destroyed, but as soon as this battle end they would likely immediately vie for supremacy. With allies like that, who needs enemies? Both nations were already planning for the eventual showdown and maneuvering accordingly, so the tension was high.

A little prodding is all it takes to turn friends to foes.

Malkin Mercenary State must push for that.

The brave and famed Viga Mercenary volunteered to lead this mission.

Leading a few soldiers through the forest and raiding the rear.

An extraordinarily challenging mission, even in success there's little chance to return alive.

Even if the raid succeeded, to avoid capture they would have to commit suicide.

To prevent identification, no personal items could be brought.

They would die anonymous, as traitors. No one would sing their deeds.

Even so, Viga said this to Malkin.

"Fear not, if I become the spirit that guides us to victory, our people will eulogize us. A heroic death like Twin Emperor Migus • Gumis, won't that be glorious?"

Taking the heroes that died in battle against Laplace as his example, Viga took on this heavy burden.

With him were ten subordinates.

Three intermediate North God swordsman, and seven mercenaries without particular affiliations.

Viga himself was advanced rank in Sword God Style, but without healers in the group, it lacked in both experience and skills.

Magicians are a valuable commodity in this region. In this decisive battle, the main force certainly cannot spare something so valuable to the sacrificial unit. Yet, they must succeed in inducing the enemies to fight amongst themselves.

(Ha.... Never would I imagine myself volunteering for something like this.) Viga couldn't help but joke about it.

He was a mercenary from birth. Born in a mercenary camp, his father died while his mother was still pregnant, then his mother too when he could barely remember. He was eventually sold off as a slave to the organization that eventually became Malkin Mercenaries. The Mercenaries trained him in swords,

in the art of war, and only for money and survival he survived till this day.

Never would he imagine that it'd be honor that would do him in.

(Acting like some kind of knight...)

Only knights choose honor over life.

But... Viga suddenly thought.

(Maybe that makes me a knight of Malkin Mercenary State.) Thinking that way made him unusually proud.

For a person without a home like Viga, Malkin Mercenary State had been a home hard won.

He was fighting to protect his homeland.

He had made fun of that type of people in the past, but now facing the same predicament, it felt strangely comforting.

"Captain, we're almost here."

"Be careful. Now that we're here, let's try to die by human hands."

"Hahah, as you say."

So far they had met very few magic beasts.

A full day's travel, with nary a rest or sleep, the fact they only had two encounters had been a small miracle.

Unfortunately, he lost one subordinate.

Even though they were vigilant, they still failed to notice a Red Leaf Tiger hidden in the bushes that took him.

The magical beast was heavily wounded already. Seems like it was also prey to something else.

What could send the most feared beast in the forest into hiding..?

(Maybe the Master of the Forest.)

Viga had heard of rumors about this Master of the Forest.

Supposedly a giant five meter long lizard - a Grade A magical beast -

Karentosaurus.

Even though Viga didn't know whether Karentosaurus actually exists. If it did, it certainly could deal such a heavy wound to the B-grade Red Leaf Tiger.

Of course, if that creature was to attack, Viga and the remaining nine subordinates certainly would not survive unscathed.

As such, Viga and the rest advanced cautiously.

Luckily, they had some experience with trekking through forests.

They understood how to avoid magical beasts, and how to call for backup while maintaining the initiative when encountering them. For battle tested veterans like them, it was a necessary skill.

Of course, Viga's group wasn't the only one with that kind of expertise.

"Who's there?"

"Ah!"

By the time they realized it, the two troops were already face to face.

Both ten in number.

All twenty men were wearing the armors of Blows Empire.

The only difference between them was, only Viga's troop knew that they're fakes.

"Whose troops are you? Report your rank and stations!"

Demanding their identities was a man standing in a set of lavishly trimmed armor.

"Draw your swords! Don't leave a man alive!"

Without a reply, Viga shouted the order to his subordinates. Immediately, all of them unsheathed their swords and charged at the Blows forces.

"Ah, deserters! Curses!"

The Blows Empire captain abruptly determined that Viga's as deserters.

Even though he's wrong, even if he's wrong, their actions remained unchanged. Whether against deserters or enemy soldiers disguised as Blows

soldiers, the results would be the same.

"Kill them all! Blows don't need cowards that run from battle!"

Blows soldiers were quick to react.

"Ughhh!"

"Cu... Curses...!"

Rapidly, two on Viga's side were already slain. In an instant, they were on a back foot.

Blows Empire soldiers were disciplined and well trained.

What Viga did not know was, the enemies before him were in fact Emperor Blows' personal guards.

Why had the imperial guards strayed into the forest, so far away from the emperor?

It happened a little while ago.

Emperor Blows was personally surveying the battlefield to encourage his soldiers.

Suddenly, a magical beast appeared from the forest and attacked the emperor, wounding his hand slightly. Even though that creature was immediately repulsed, and the wound healed, the fact that the emperor was attacked before his soldiers could not be dismissed.

To avoid hurting their morale and to maintain the imperial prestige, the emperor deployed his personal guards.

He ordered them to engage the beast, wound it, and retrieve its pelt.

The imperial guards immediately jumped into action and marched into the forest.

Yet, unexpectedly, rather than magical beast, what they found in the forest were Viga's troops.

"So... this is how it ends..."

Even the best swordsman under Viga fell easily to the imperial guard.

"Have you realized yet? Your opponent is the imperial guard captain Klein Danoltas! The Water Saint Klein! Still think you can win?"

"Curses!"

"If you surrender now, I may still offer mercy!"

Viga was filled with anxiety. Obviously, surrendering wasn't an option. The fact that they weren't Blows troops would be immediately exposed once captured and interrogated.

If that happened, the mission would fail.

Malkin would perish.

Who wins supremacy between Dzik Kingdom and Blows Empire remains to be seen, but the homeland Viga and the others worked so hard to build would disappear.

But Viga had nothing.

The power gap was obvious. Resistance was futile. Annihilation was inevitable.

(Malkin, I'm sorry...)

With a heavy heart, Viga apologized to the comrades that stood by his side all this time.

Right then.

"Goaaaaaah!"

A gigantic lizard came crashing in.

A fearsome, bright green lizard, five meters long.

Its impressive body was covered in wounds, blood gushing all over.

Just like that, it crashed in between Viga and the others, spilling a mouthful of blood as it fell.

And in the next moment.

"Gaaaaaaa!"

Another beast appeared.

This one let out a terrifying scream as it leaped midair. Landing on the lizard's head, with both hands it stabbed fiercely downwards.

The lizard gave a final cry and drew its last breath.

For a brief moment, the surrounding crowd could not fathom what transpired.

"What!"

Because after defeating the lizard, the beast did not cease its movement.

Leaping down off the lizard's head, in an instant, the beast had already cut down two Blows Imperial Guard.

"What are you doing!"

Viga was suddenly convinced that the beast before him was the true Master of the Forest.

Yet it had an outline quite akin to man's. With chocolate skin, grey hair, the pointy ears of a beast race.

The beast wielded a single edged sword, an eerie red glow shone from the thin blade, which was obviously valuable.

"Who are you?"

Blows Imperial Guard Captain Klein stepped forth yelling.

"Identify yourself!"

"Grrrr!"

But the beast did not answer.

What stood before it must be an enemy... What wielded weapons against it must be an enemy, and it reacted accordingly.

"Gaaaa!"

"Gah, attack!"

With an angry roar, the beast struck at Klein.

But Klein was Water Saint. The Water God Style was designed for deflecting attacks and counterstrikes.

Even yet...

"T-the Longsword of Light... S-sword God Style..?"

The beast's strike cut Klein's sword in two.

But that wasn't all, Klein's armor cracked, then his cloth, skin, muscle, bone and all...

Finally, Klein's upper and lower halves separated.

Even after witnessing their captain cut in two, Blows Imperial Guard did not waver.

"Curses!"

"You killed the Captain!"

"Avenge the Captain!"

They're all at least intermediate rank in Water or North God Style.

All quite capable in their own rights.

Yet---

"Gaaaaa!"

Every time the beast roared and slashed its sword, one and another were cut in two.

The beast moved like lightning, and its roar would shrivel men. No one could keep up with it.

In a blink of the eye, the entire imperial guard forces were annihilated.

"..."

Viga's forces stood frozen.

They couldn't comprehend what had happened. A beast barged in and annihilated the enemy forces. But, why? For what purpose?

"Grrrr."

The beast turned to them.

No reason in those eyes.

Its eyes glared at Viga's troops with killing intent, bringing terror to their hearts.

What the beast wore was revealing, but what it induced was not desire, but fear.

Desire?

Indeed, the beast was female. Definitely feminine in appearance.

Seeing this, Viga suddenly recalled something.

What his Sword Saint ranked instructor once said.

He was a properly trained swordsman from the Holy Land of Sword that always refused to explain how he ended up a mercenary. But in idle chatter, he would often reminisce over stories of his training days.

Particularly about a brutish, stubborn person, more akin to a mad dog.

That idiot actually pursued the sword king. Even though she was an idiot, she wasn't a bad person.

But when cornered she would go berserk and attack friend and foe alike, she gained everyone's animosity.

That sword king from his past, versus this girl before him---

They're must be the same.

"Don't tell me!"

Viga said, while performing the Sword God Style courtesy that his instructor also taught him.

Kneeling on one knee, with head bowed, both an act of respect and of capulation.

"You're the Sword King, Ghyslaine Dedorudia-sama?"

As soon as he said those words---

The beast stopped moving.

After a while, Ghyslaine regained her senses.

"I was once told of your tales, but never did I expect to meet you here!"

"Have you seen a girl nearby, red hair, about 12? Or a 10 year old boy, good in magic, he works too?"

Ghyslaine disregarded Viga's comments.

Just with bloodshot eyes staring, she asked Viga coldly.

"No, I haven't..."

Viga shook his head while rummaging what info he just gleamed.

A red haired girl of 12.

A boy magician of 10.

Having lived a long life, he has certainly seen a few slaves that would fit that description. But certainly not local, so he could only shake his head.

Since this is the forbidden forest where magical beasts lurk.

Why would children be in a place like this?

"Huh? Excuse me then."

That said, Ghyslaine prepared to leave.

But after a few steps, she suddenly turned, stopped, and inquired.

"Say, where am I?"

Viga dutifully informed Ghyslaine that they were located in the mid-east portion of Central Continent named Strife Zone, a forest of Malkin Mercenary State on the northern side of Strife Zone.

He probably didn't need to confess his current mission also. But considering that Ghyslaine just saved their lives, and fears over their fate lest angering her, he automatically went in crisis management mode.

"That's impossible."

Ghyslaine couldn't believe it.

Because she didn't understand why she would end up here.

Viga carefully inquired the details.

Turned out Ghyslaine was working as the girl's bodyguard in Fittoe Region of

Asura Kingdom. They came under attack, and before she realized it, they were swallowed by a blaze of light. When she regained consciousness, she found herself in this forest. Afterwards she went into a frenzy in the course of fighting a magical beast, and killed their enemies in accident.

"In any case, this is without a doubt Malkin Mercenary State, part of Strife Zone."

"... I see."

Ghyslaine began to think.

Viga couldn't guess what Ghyslaine was thinking about.

After spending five seconds in thought, she looked up towards the sky.

"Then, I should head south for Asura."

After checking the sun's position, Ghyslaine began to head straight south.

In the same direction as Viga's troops.

"Hold on, right there is enemy territory."

"And what of it?"

"Those words... do you have a plan?"

"If anyone tries to stop me, I'll cut him down."

Ghyslaine's emotionless eyes make one question whether she had yet to regain her sanity.

Viga didn't know what to say.

What would push her to go that far?

"Would be best, if Rudeus and Eris-sama remained together, but if they separated like I did... I must go."

Hearing that, Viga finally understood.

(So we're the same?)

To the Sword King, those two child, especially the red haired girl, must be more important than anything else.

She's so desperate to protect what's most precious to her.

"Then for now, how about we work together? Since we also have our own reasons for heading that direction."

"Fine with me."

Viga felt an ounce of pride.

Although their goals differed, and the Sword King had her own to protect, temporarily they may be comrades in arms.

As result, Viga, his troops, and Ghyslaine left the forest together to launch a surprise raid on Dzik Kingdom.

They were lucky.

With the battle readied to engage against Malkin, attention of Dzik forces were shifted toward the front.

Meanwhile, Emperor Blows was growing anxious over his guards' return. He began to suspect that Dzik took advantage and laid a trap for the Imperial Guards, destroying them.

On closer observation, Dzik forces had camped too close by the forest. Maybe they were hiding a larger force in the forest?

Suspicious were hard to overcome once planted.

In truth, King Dzik was a coward, and instead had chosen his camp to avoid raiding from Blows Empire and incidentally positioned his camp against the forest---

The result of all these.

Had been the miraculous success of Viga's raid.

The raid underway. Ghyslaine roared, and with Viga screaming astride her, they rushed into the enemy camp, and found themselves outside of King Dzik's tent.

King Dzik was shocked to see Viga's troops charging out of the forest. Seeing their outfits, he was convinced of a raid by Blows Empire. Immediately, he ordered his troops to march against Blows Empire's, while preparing his own

retreat.

A mere ten seconds later--

King Dzik died by Ghyslaine's sword.

If King Dzik had survived, maybe he would've realized that Viga's troops were not Empire Blows' forces and recalled his order... But a king's order was absolute, and Dzik Kingdom's forces charged at Empire Blow's.

Even though it was earlier than anticipated, knowing they'll eventually come to blows, Empire Blows retaliated in kind.

Simultaneously Malkin Mercenary State also marched out.

A messy, three-sided battle.

Despite being enveloped by enemy forces, Viga was somehow still alive.

Despite being sent on a suicide mission as part of a feint raid against Dzik Kingdom, he found a survival strategy.

Separated from his subordinates, with only one ally remaining.

The one before his eyes.

Following that chocolate-colored silhouette and the red sword that gleamed from it, Viga could only watch as she slain one enemy after another. Never before Viga witnessed a back so reliable. He felt even a little pride for being able to protect that back.

After a while, no more Ditz Kingdom armor remained standing, only Blows Empire forces were left.

A strange girl wielding a red sword barging into the battlefield was an odd sight to behold, but seeing her cutting down Ditz Kingdom soldiers and the Blows Empire armor-cladded Viga, they mistakenly assumed reinforcement had arrived.

In that moment, Malkin Mercenaries had also charged in. With cooperation between forces divided, the allied front broke down, the numerically inferior Malkin Mercenary State managed to broke through the front lines.

The battle quickly devolved into a melee.

In the midst of the fierce battle Viga and Ghyslaine separated.

After some time, he reunited with friendly forces.

Malkin Mercenaries cheered when they saw Vega's face and all rushed to surround and protect him.

But Viga did not retreat to the rear, and instead remained in battle.

As the battle waged on, Viga became caked in mud and blood, from head to toe, hard to distinguish one from the other.

His left eye was shot out, just when he was trying to figure out the source, he saw it.

Viga witnessed that moment.

Under an especially large banner.

A man with heavy, black beard clad in luxurious Empire Blows armor.

A red shone from the chocolate-skinned woman's sword, and that bearded man... Emperor Blow's head fell.

"Ha... Ha... Haaaahahah!"

Viga laughed loudly, and still laughing he continued his battle ---

Finally, he survived the battle.

Malkin Mercenary State had won the decisive battle.

Part 4

For accomplishing this feat, Viga Mercenary was rewarded the rank of general.

He was credited for the victory of the decisive battle, and even recognized as the founding hero for Malkin Mercenary State.

Viga Mercenary also went on to accomplish other deeds, and respected as among the great generals of Malkin history, but that's another story.

Yet the great general Viga began to act strangely since that battle.

He wore on his neck, a pendant, carved with portrait of a beast race, and he colored his sword red.

"It's a spell."

Then his underlings started copying his spell, and others too, until eventually the practice spread and ended up in the current state.

Someone once asked him what magic it was, and Viga answered.

"Because in that battle the Goddess granted me her aid, I imitate her."

From his incantation and declaration, people invented the Goddess of the Forest Reinu.

The Goddess' name is actually Ghyslaine.

But that name, Ghyslaine, was difficult to pronounce for people of this part of Central Continent.

Their pronunciation became distorted, and eventually simply became Reinu.

Appeared out of the forest, the national savior goddess who saved and guided the great general, "Forest Goddess Reinu."

After a hundred years, Forest Goddess Reinu came to be worshipped as the protector of Malkin, and the spiritual support of every mercenary there.

Of course, Ghyslaine herself never knew of all this.

Afterwards, where did Ghyslaine go?

Did she survive?

If she survived, did she safely return to Asura Kingdom?

Was she able to reunite with that girl, so precious to her...

Viga Mercenary would never know.

Translator's Notes and References